

Karen Melvin

■ BRISTOL TOWNSHIP/PUBLIC SAFETY

EPA's Kostmayer heads investigation of explosion

The former Bucks County congressman said the probe into the chemical explosion is going smoothly and that the air was not contaminated.

By James-E. Stanton
Courier Times

Former Bucks County congressman Peter Kostmayer, named yesterday to head the investigation into Tuesday's explosion at a Bristol Township chemical plant, said there's no indication the explosion contaminated the air.

"We are monitoring the air on a continual basis, and there has been no sign of (contami-

nation)," said Kostmayer, administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency's Philadelphia office.

Kostmayer was responding to concerns expressed by people who live near United Chemical Technologies Inc. about possible harmful exposure to chemical vapors. A plume of chemical-laden smoke was emitted during the explosion. Physicians described the chemicals involved in the explosion as caustic organic compounds that can cause eye, respiratory and skin irritations.

Earlier, EPA spokesman Harold Yates said anyone exhibiting suspicious symptoms should consult his or her personal physician. Officials at both Lower Bucks Hospital and the county Health Department yesterday

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Blast: Kostmayer heading chemical plant probe

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were referring calls about possible after-effects to the EPA, but Yates said his office had not received any complaints.

Three people caught in the blast remained in Philadelphia hospitals yesterday. A fourth victim admitted after the explosion — fireman Horace Hopkins of Croydon — was discharged yesterday from Lower Bucks

Hospital.

A total of 40 employees and firefighters were treated and released yesterday from Lower Bucks. Their injuries ranged from cuts and bruises to respiratory conditions and heat exhaustion.

Yesterday, Kostmayer said his agency was monitoring the clean-up being conducted by the firm. He said the work appeared to be satisfactory.

"If I were told that things were going unsatisfactorily, I have the authority to sign an administrative order giving us total control," he said, adding that his agency is leading the investigation because of its "resources and expertise."

"It was a friendly takeover, not a hostile one," Kostmayer quipped.

The three people remaining hospitalized were:

■ Laura Cutler, 25, address unavailable, in fair condition at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania.

■ David Norwood, 56, of New Hope, in stable condition at the Frankford Hospital's Torresdale Campus.

■ Olga Velez, 40, of Bristol Borough, in guarded condition at Frankford Hospital's Torresdale Campus.

Blast at plant hurts dozens, closes I-95

A mix of chemicals apparently caused the explosion at the Lower Bucks plant. One firefighter and several employees remained hospitalized last night.

By Mark Davis
and Kathy Boccia
INQUIRER STAFF WRITERS

A late-morning explosion and fire ripped through a Bucks County chemical plant yesterday, forcing nearly 40 people to seek emergency care, closing Interstate 95 and the Pennsylvania Turnpike, and making hundreds flee their homes in the path of a possible toxic menace.

The blast rumbled through United Chemical Technologies Inc. at 11:56 a.m., followed immediately by fire and acrid smoke that rolled through the plant and neighboring businesses at Keystone Industrial Park in Bristol Township in lower Bucks County. The fire burned for almost three hours and caused nearly \$3 million in damage before firefighters brought it under control.

People requiring care were sent to Lower Bucks Hospital for medical treatment or to pass through a make-shift shower set up on the hospital grounds, and many more in the area were forced to spend the afternoon away from home until police let them return shortly after 6 p.m.

And, as the day ended, investigators wondered what had happened to cause a fire and explosion so severe that they blew holes in the structure's roof and walls.

The recent heat wave could be the culprit, federal environmental officials and company officials theorized. High temperatures, on the first day of summer, may have caused a combustion between two chemicals during an otherwise routine mixing procedure, they said.

Whatever the cause, the blast set the stage for a tense afternoon that passed in a cacaphony of sirens, a blur of emergency flashers and a series of wide-eyed moments of worry.

Police and firefighters evacuated
See **EXPLOSION** on A8



The Philadelphia Inquirer / MICHAEL MALLY

Firefighters spray water onto a smoldering part of the plant, at the Keystone Industrial Park. The fire burned almost three hours.

AR100015

Plant explosion ignites confusion in homes, highways

EXPLOSION from A-1
an apartment complex, homes and businesses within a half-mile radius. Retirees grabbed pets, young mothers grasped toddlers' hands, and couples gave each other support as officials urged them to leave, and leave quickly. Others, all of them either United Chemical employees or firefighters, sought medical help at Lower Bucks Hospital for an array of injuries — chemical splashes, burns and smoke inhalation.

One firefighter, Horace Hopkins, 34, of Croydon, remained overnight at Lower Bucks for treatment of flash burns. Physicians also ordered an airlift to the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania for plant employee Laura Cutler, 25, whose condition was listed as fair last night.

Two other employees, David Norwood, 56, of New Hope, and Olga Velez, 49, of Bristol, were admitted to Frankford Hospital, Torresdale Campus. Norwood was in stable condition with facial cuts and broken nose; Velez was in guarded condition with a head injury.

Still others boarded school buses that took them to a senior citizens' center adjacent to the Bristol Township Municipal Building. There, about 50 people ate sliced bread, sipped iced water and swapped evacuation stories. Jean Kinne brought her cat, a tail-twitching, 18-pound tom named T.C.

On I-95, police set up temporary roadblocks at 1 p.m., waving off traffic between State Road 332 in Bensalem Township and the Old Lincoln Highway at Middletown Township. The interstate reopened at 3:20 p.m.

Officials also briefly closed a one-mile section of the Pennsylvania Turnpike. They also shut off Bartram Road, the only artery leading to the center of the sprawling industrial park that suddenly became the focus of the entire region.

It was an afternoon of massive confusion. For Ken Pabon, it began with thunder. Or so he thought.

"It was almost lunchtime when I heard it — *Boom!*" said Pabon, 31. He stood on the edge of Ford Road, just outside his apartment at Keystone Gardens, as firefighters and police began urging everyone in the 617-unit complex to leave.

"*Boom!*" Pabon repeated. "I thought it was thunder, so I looked outside the window.

"Then I saw it wasn't raining."

Instead, a sudden fire had ignited chemicals, blowing out part of a wall and blasting away a portion of the building's flat roof, said Ed Copper, Bristol Township's fire marshal. Late yesterday, he and other officials were trying to reconstruct the events leading up to the blast.

A combination of two chemicals might have ignited the blaze, said Michael Telepchak, United Chemical's president. Those compounds, trichlorosilane and styrene, apparently combusted late in the morning, he said.

"We weren't expecting any reac-

tion," he said. "We do this all this time."

But this time, something — possibly the recent heat wave — caused the chemicals to begin expanding as employees mixed them in a steel drum, said Telepchak. The employees ran and called for help.

Everything happened quickly after that. Pete Yurgel, the company's vice president of operations, remembered sitting down for an early lunch. "We heard a noise," he said. "We heard the evacuation order [at the plant]. Then we started a head count."

Telepchak said late last night that 73 of the company's 76 employees were working at the time of the explosion.

The blast and fire injured six employees, two of whom remained pinned underneath twisted steel and broken walls for nearly 30 minutes until firefighters freed them, officials said.

Among the injured was Barry Raikes, 61, a \$6.50-per-hour temporary worker who was assembling medical equipment in a room with six others "when everything went to hell."

Debris rained from every direction, knocking him to the floor, Raikes recalled as he waited at Lower Bucks Hospital to be treated for cuts and bruises. The room went dark and Raikes crawled to another office, where he found others in the dust and din.

The explosion sounded like a bomb to Sheryl Hoenigke, who cut her left foot in the melee following the blast. She had been on the job two days when the lights went out in her part of the plant.

"All of a sudden, the ceiling fell. The smell was atrocious," said Hoenigke, 25. "I thought I was going to pass out."

The toll was heavy among firefighters, too. Twenty-six suffered heat exhaustion or smoke inhalation, and they and others also were treated for chemical exposure at the makeshift shower, made of white PVC pipe, erected outside Lower Bucks Hospital's emergency-room entrance. Stepping out of soiled clothing, the firefighters washed off behind blue tarpaulins and emerged, scrub-

skinned and looking slightly sheepish, clad in sky-blue hospital garb.

Others remained on the scene, including federal Environmental Protection Agency specialists and members of the Bucks County Incident Response Team. As the sun dipped below the evergreens ringing the plant, the officials stepped gingerly into the still-smoking site, looking for answers.

Some of those answers may be hard to get, said Peter H. Kostmayer, the EPA's regional director. "We know

how [the chemicals] combusted, but we don't know if it was employee error or carelessness," he said.

Officials already were looking into United Chemical's history of handling hazardous materials, Kostmayer added.

The plant has a short history at its present site. It relocated to the 200-acre industrial park in January, moving from Horsham in Montgomery County. Last December, it received a \$1 million low-interest loan to expand operations, and planned to grow to nearly 100 workers in the next three years, said Bob Cormack, executive director of the Bucks County Industrial Development Corp.

"It's a really neat company because it was doing great things," he said.

It also was handling and storing about 30 of the most hazardous chemicals in existence. The compounds at the site included chloroform, sulfuric acid, bromine, potassium cyanide, and chlorine, according to documents filed with state and federal agencies in Harrisburg.

Their toxic presence was enough to prompt officials to empty neighborhoods and highways, and even to clear the airspace above the site as smoke rose into the sky and sirens sounded everywhere.

AR100016

20F3

Some didn't get the word, but fled anyway

Not all plant neighbors were eager to evacuate. And not all were told to.

By Doug Donovan
and Marguerite P. Jones
INQUIRER CORRESPONDENTS

Connie Compton was sitting at a table beneath her bedroom window typing a letter to her brother at midday yesterday when the explosion shook her house. The force of the blast rattled a set of five autographed baseballs and a figurine of the Virgin Mary that sat on the windowsill.

Compton, 33, jumped from her chair and looked out the window. Through a line of trees running along her back yard she saw black smoke rising from the United Chemical Technologies Inc. plant, less than 200 yards away.

Across the street, Jessica Seabridge, 14, and a friend were sitting at Seabridge's newspaper-covered kitchen table doing their nails when the entire house moved. Seabridge said she immediately closed all the windows and doors while her two dogs ran barking through the house.

When she went outside, Seabridge

joined other residents along Avenue E in the Newportville neighborhood of Bristol Township, who were standing at the edges of their lawns, unsure of where to go or what to do as the smoke rose overhead.

Everyone mentioned a rumor of evacuation. But no one was leaving. Yet. There was no sign of the police or firefighters. Apparently, they were busy evacuating neighboring sites, such as Keystone Industrial Park, Bristol Plaza shopping center and Keystone Gardens apartment complex.

By midafternoon almost 50 people had filed into the Bristol Township Senior Citizens Center, beside the Municipal Building, the official site for evacuees who had nowhere else to go.

"I'm a nervous wreck," said 79-year-old Loretta Keith, who lives in the 617-unit Keystone Gardens. "I called all my friends, but no one was home. It's awful when you have to leave your own home."

As each new group of evacuees

trickled into the senior citizens' center, Loretta Sloan was on watch, scouting the area for her 25-year-old daughter, Tina.

An accountant with United Chemical, Tina Sloan had called her mother from a nearby business just after the explosion.

"She was really shook up," said Loretta Sloan, "but she was all right." Three hours later, however, Sloan had no idea where her daughter had gone after the evacuation.

Police reported that some Keystone Gardens residents were initially reluctant to leave their apartments or wanted to wait for relatives to pick them up. But other neighbors of United Chemical were not even given official notification of an evacuation from their homes.

Mary Jacobs of Avenue E, for instance, hadn't heard anything from police or firefighters. She was worried enough, however, that she decided to take her three children to her mother's in Delran, N.J.

Nothing on Tuesday afternoon

was making much sense to Nancy Anderson. Anderson, who lives next door to Compton, was busy packing her mini-van with the four children she was baby-sitting, her two dogs and a recalcitrant cat.

When everyone was ready to go, Anderson looked up at the overcast sky that earlier was covered with black smoke.

"I didn't hear anything" of an evacuation, she said. "And nobody's closer (to the factory) than us."

For Anderson and her neighbors, the only news of an evacuation came pedaling down the street more than two hours after the explosion. A young man in a red-hooded sweat shirt, who said he was a volunteer firefighter, rode his black mountain bike up and down the street advising residents to get out.

Avenue E, he said, "should have been the first place [evacuated]."

By that time, however, most of people in the neighborhood had taken it upon themselves to head out.

Water could be cause of Bristol plant blast

The explosion was the second time a chemical mix went haywire. Officials defended the plant's record.

By Bob Fernandez
and Christine Schiavo
FOR THE INQUIRER

A United Chemical Technologies Inc. official said yesterday that undetected water in a 55-gallon drum may have sparked a chemical reaction that caused the explosion and subsequent fire Tuesday in a Bristol Township factory.

The blast, the second uncontrolled chemical reaction in the factory since June 10, blew holes in the roof and sent nearly 40 people to the hospital suffering from smoke inhalation and acid burns. Smoke plumes could be seen for miles, and state police closed down a five-mile portion of Interstate 95 in Bucks County.

Lawrence C. Pollock, vice president of finance, said yesterday that the June 10 incident, which caused no injuries, was unrelated to Tuesday's explosion, and he defended the company's safety record.

The first incident involved a 50-liter flask of chemicals that exploded

in one of the factory's containment rooms, forcing an evacuation of employees from the plant, Pollock said.

The factory, under a previous owner, had a history of safety compliance problems, according to federal documents.

Pollock said yesterday that employees on Tuesday had poured the chemical mixture into a 55-gallon drum without an adverse reaction. But when they poured the mixture into a second drum, and then capped it, they noticed a swelling and rumbling, he said. Officials believe there was water in the second drum.

Pollock said the reaction between the water and chemicals — styrene and trichlorosilane — produced hydrochloric acid. Hospital officials say some injuries were acid burns.

Environmental Protection Agency officials said yesterday that they had not completed their investigation and could not comment.

David Noll, environmental special-
See EXPLOSION on B9

EXPLOSION from B1
ist with the Bucks County Health Department, said an oily sheen was visible on water outside the plant, indicating some contamination.

Noll drew samples yesterday from drinking water wells at three homes abutting the plant. He said the county should know in two weeks if contaminants reached the wells. He said the Health Department has not advised residents against drinking the water.

Three United Chemical employees remained hospitalized yesterday in Philadelphia for injuries suffered in the explosion.

David Norwood, 56, of New Hope, and Olga Velez, 49, of Bristol, were being treated at Frankford Hospital, Torresdale Campus. Norwood was in stable condition with cuts and a broken nose. Velez was in guarded condition with a head injury. The third employee, Laura Cutler, 25, of Philadelphia, was in fair condition at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania.

Horace Hopkins, 34, of the Croydon Fire Department, was released from

Lower Bucks Hospital Wednesday evening. He was injured while trying to assist another firefighter who ran out of air in the building.

United Chemical Technologies, formerly of Horsham, purchased the Bristol Township factory in November from Huls America Inc., a Piscataway, N.J., chemical company.

Under Huls America's ownership, the factory was fined by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration in 1992 and 1993 for safety violations. In 1992 a \$1,875 fine was levied for improper storage of flammable liquids, improper tagging of dangerous equipment, and a deficient emergency-response plan, OSHA records show. In 1993, a \$562 fine was levied for failing to provide instructions to employees about what to do during a fire, and for a partially obstructed emergency exit, blocked access to fire extinguishers and inappropriately stored oxygen cylinders.

In 1991, the EPA sent a "notice of violation" for certain regulatory failures, including improper record-keeping and inappropriate storage of chemical drums. A follow-up inspection

in late 1993 — shortly before the sale of the plant — found that the factory had met the necessary requirements, EPA records show.

United Chemical officials said yesterday that the factory was in full compliance by Nov. 2, when the company acquired the business. "Everything was cleaned up before we took over," said Michael Telepchak, United Chemical's president. "We wanted the building to be environmentally sound and violation free."

United Chemical got a low-interest loan through the Bucks County Industrial Development Corp. to buy the Bristol Township factory, in the Keystone Industrial Park.

As part of the agreement for the loan, United Chemical said it would hire 70 employees over the next three years, Bucks County officials said. United Chemical hired about 35 former Huls America employees.

The company now has 75 employees who assemble plastic medical devices and process chemicals.

State Department of Environmental Resources spokeswoman Chris Novak said yesterday that her agency

has no record of United Chemical, even though the company is required to file quarterly hazardous waste reports. "The company does not appear in the records we have in the office," said Novak.

However, Mark McHenry, United Chemical safety manager, said the company filed with the DER in April the necessary report on the company's disposal practices.

Metropolitan Area News in Brief

EPA takes over cleanup after explosion at plant

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency yesterday took over cleanup of the United Chemical Technologies Inc. plant in Bristol Township, the site of a chemical explosion and fire last week that forced the evacuation of nearby residents and injured 39 people.

United Chemical had been in charge of the cleanup since the June 21 explosion. Peter Kostmayer, EPA regional administrator in Philadelphia, said yesterday that his agency has been satisfied with those efforts. He said the EPA stepped in to "formalize the chronology of the cleanup." An administrative order he signed states that a threat to the public health exists. "We do not regard the threat as imminent or immediate," Kostmayer stressed.

He added that air samples taken by the EPA have turned up "no emissions of chemicals at all subsequent to the fire." Company officials believe the explosion was caused by the presence of water in a drum where two chemicals — trichloroethane and styrene — were being mixed.

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